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AUTHOR Culbertson, Hugh M.; Jeffers, Dennis W.
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ABSTRACT

Public relations instructors can begin to develop an appreciation of the social, political and economic (S-P-E) contexts on the part of their students by beginning to integrate this thinking into existing courses and curricula. Social contexts deal with cultural and subcultural beliefs, contacts within a community or organization, and frames of reference and standards of comparisons. Political contexts include activities and strategies of political actors and role and power relationships. Economic contexts include availability of resources to client organizations and publics and coping with and cutting costs. During the term students can be expected to do several things that help enhance sensitivity to the S-P-E contexts: (1) draw on a range of S-P-E social science and humanities concepts while critically and comprehensively defining public relations goals; (2) read several case reports and define the three overlapping contexts; (3) confront ethical situations that cannot be examined apart from the social-political contexts; (4) prepare a paper which looks at an actual client's role, public relations problems, key publics, and services to those publics; and (5) hold a series of panel discussions on timely cases. Following these and other exercises, most students seem to see public relations as a dynamic, exciting process central to the client organization's basic function, a process that entails far more than promotion and publicity when placed in a larger context. Selected findings from three public relations research projects illustrate the use of the S-P-E concepts. (Twenty-six references are attached.) (MG)

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THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS: KEYS IN EDUCATING THE TRUE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONAL

By

Hugh M. Culbertson and Dennis W. Jeffers

CS506699

Dr. Culbertson is a professor in the E. W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University. Dr. Jeffers is an associate professor in the Department of Journalism at Central Michigan University. The authors would like to thank Dr. Robert Rayfield for his encouragement, insight and feedback. This paper was prepared for presentation to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington, D. C., August 10, 1989.

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THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS: KEYS IN EDUCATING THE TRUE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONAL

In their early days, public relations practitioners often seemed quite willing to describe their main job as image building. In fact, an early history of the field was entitled The Image Merchants: the Fabulous World of Public Relations (Ross, 1959). "Image" is usually taken to denote beliefs about a public relations client -- often viewed in isolation from the environment in which she, he or it operates.

Such a view seems consistent with what Grunig and Hunt (1984:24-30) call the press-agent model of public relations. Here practitioners basically seek to gain awareness of a client, perhaps to keep TV ratings up or turnstiles clicking. Also, image bulks large in some applications of two-way asymmetric PR -- at least, when applied to product publicity and marketing/advertising support. The focus is often on gaining basic awareness and promoting rather simple "overt payoff behaviors" such as an impulse purchase or a vote on some candidate or issue about which the audience knows little (Grunig and Hunt, 1984:37-41).

What separates the more sophisticated PR models from press-agentry is a research component. However, especially in the more advanced models a research program is inadequate when it focuses on the client in isolation of larger contexts. Practitioners need to understand what affects "image" and how it is likely to bear on audience behavior. Clearly this becomes very important in the public-information and two-way symmetric models (Grunig and Hunt,

1984:30-7, 40-2). Both of these require that a practitioner consider a client's social, political and economic contexts in order to:

1. Identify needs of the client's publics.

2. Evaluate organizational outputs -- products and services designed to help meet those needs.

3. Interpret probable future growth, decline or change of needs and outputs.

Without an understanding of the larger multi-faceted context in which the client operates, practitioners can scarcely hope to play a key role in strategic planning (Grunig, 1988), issues management (Heath and Nelson, 1986), management by objectives (Nager and Allen, 1984:6-7) and environmental scanning. All of these activities are widely viewed as central to the PR practitioner as manager.

How does the potential public relations practitioner develop the skills necessary to gain an understanding of a client's social, political and economic contexts (S-P-E)? Certainly, one must have good analytical skills and broad knowledge--especially of the social sciences and humanities. These inclinations and abilities cannot be taught in a single public relations course--they require a broad liberal education taken very seriously by the student.

However, public relations instructors can begin to develop an appreciation for the S-P-E Contexts on the part of their students by beginning to integrate such thinking into existing

courses and curricula. This paper is designed to aid them in that process by providing a framework for explaining the contexts, outlining class activities that require application of "contextual thinking," and then fleshing out the various S-P-E Context elements by discussing them in relation to findings from three different public relations research projects. Finally, some implications and suggestions are offered.

FRAMEWORK

In teaching public relations principles, the senior author emphasizes on opening day that one major goal of the course is to enhance sensitivity to the S-P-E Contexts. The framework used in class for defining these contexts is:

*Social context -- 1) cultural and subcultural beliefs, 2) contacts within a community or organization, and 3) frames of reference and standards of comparison.

*Political context -- 4) activities and strategies of political actors, and 5) role and power relations. (Note that we regard political context as including all questions of gaining organized support from key publics within and outside the organization. We do not restrict the analysis entirely to government behavior and relations.)

*Economic context -- 6) availability of resources to client organizations and publics, and 7) costs: coping with and cutting them.

CLASS ACTIVITIES

During the term students are expected to do several things that help enhance sensitivity to the S-P-E Contexts:

*Draw on a wide range of S-P-E social science and humanities concepts while critically and comprehensively defining public relations goals. Concepts highlighted include source credibility, attitude, informal community leadership, information level, innovation adoption/diffusion, information systems, management by objectives, public relations role theory and role-taking.

*Read several case reports -- including detailed accounts of the cases presented later in this paper -- and define, both in class discussions and in written reports, the three overlapping contexts.

*Confront ethical situations that cannot be examined apart from the social-political-contexts, using small-group discussion and analysis of "non-partisan goals" (Culbertson 1973). This leads into analysis of a positive view of ethics, stressing "dos" as well as "don'ts," buttressed by study of situationism vs. absolutism, maturational ethics a la Kohlberg(1981), role-taking and two-way communication as viewed by Rawls(1971), and other philosophical concepts relating to ethics.

*Prepare a paper which looks at an actual client's role, public relations problems (as defined by the student, not the client), key publics, and services to those publics. In preparing this paper, students go to the Reader's Guide to

Periodical Literature, Nexis, and specialized indexes and magazines to build a bibliography on the client's social, political and economic contexts. Also, they interview key members of the client organization in depth. The instructor emphasizes that, in "real life," such research provides grist for in-depth newspaper or magazine articles within the communication stage of public relations. Often students later write and place such articles.

*Hold a series of panel discussions, with about six people per panel, on timely cases ranging from recent airline disasters and insider-trading scandals to natural-resource conservation, hostile takeovers, and the fight against AIDS. In looking at each case, students define key publics; major errors and wise actions taken; strengths, weaknesses, and possible strategies relating to the client's future; and, of course, the social, political and economic contexts.

Following these and other exercises, most students seem to see public relations as a dynamic, exciting process central to the client organization's basic function. They understand that an organization simply cannot not do public relations -- to take no purposeful action is bound to have significant PR implications. And they come to see that public relations entails far more than promotion and publicity when placed in a larger context.

EXAMPLES

To help clarify the seven elements of the S-P-E Contexts, the discussion that follows is designed to define the specific concepts useful in articulating each of the three contexts by presenting selected findings from three public relations research projects that illustrate use of these concepts.

The first project was a study of the public relations posture of osteopathic medicine in Ohio. The second focused on public priorities with respect to educational and service activities carried out by a small-town police department. The third was an analysis of magazines put out by organizations representing those who raised particular breeds of livestock. The focus in the latter study was on reader needs, expectations and perceptions relating to the magazines -- and on the implications of recent growth in the number of female staff members.

Data contributing to conclusions about these PR problems were gathered by using a variety of formal and informal research methodologies. Included were content analyses, open-ended interviews with well-informed leaders, focus groups, careful reading of pertinent trade and academic literature, and survey research of both professional-organization members and the general public. Copies of papers and articles based on these research projects are available from the authors upon request.

Social Context

Cultural and Sub-cultural Beliefs These ideas deal with what is, what's right, and what's important. They serve as bases for defining one's world. As a result of socialization, such beliefs are shared by most everyone in a society -- or a well-defined subgroup such as those practicing a particular occupation.

In the police study, law officers and the public at large appeared to share a definition of the police role somewhat at variance with what cops actually do. Within the profession at large, status and awards go largely for ingenious, persistent, heroic crook-catching (Erskine, 1974, 1982; Flanagan, 1985). And media productions ranging from Dragnet to Dirty Harry have doubtless helped lead the public to focus on such activity.

In fact, however, police work has changed in the wake of social unrest and other factors. Today, American police men and women reportedly spend about 80 to 90 percent of their time maintaining order, not enforcing the law in a narrow sense (Bard, 1973:407-20). Such a gap between what an occupational group does and what people expect it to do is bound to require strong efforts in public education on the part of public relations practitioners as well as innovative procedures in police training.

In a related analysis, different occupational subcultures--police and social work--involve contrasting frames of reference which hamper cooperative effort. Walthier, et al. (1974:260-80)

assert that police are trained to value bureaucratic activities and formal standards along with competitiveness and assertiveness. Many social workers, on the other hand, tend to disdain these things.

Such divergence may make cooperation between the two groups difficult and ineffective. Yet police are the only people on duty 24 hours a day to observe and catch someone about to jump off a building or crash a car. Police must often decide when a person has "mental problems" which warrant turning him or her over to a mental-health agency for definite diagnosis. That, in turn, helps determine a case's possible disposition. Training of police and workshops which permit them to share meaning with social workers may help solve this problem.

In the livestock-magazine study, where most of the magazines were sponsored by associations, editors appeared to have developed certain beliefs -- probably based on socialization within their occupation -- about magazine priorities. Specifically, such beliefs had to do with emphasis on three types of content: "service" material useful to the farmer as he or she manages his or her own herd, "human interest" copy about others within the livestock breed group or association, and issues of regional or national scope such as interest rates and credit which might affect livestock farming (Jeffers, 1988; 1984; 1989).

Data suggested that small farmers felt a need for stories about "service" content and found this type of material helpful in day-to-day management. However, larger farmers apparently were

getting service material from other sources. These people preferred human-interest and general-issue coverage.

Obviously, then, the magazine editor must strive for an editorial mix which accommodates each group's concept of "what's right and what's important."

Contacts Within an Organization or Community Such contacts may be characterized as to frequency, level of formality, friendliness, comprehensiveness and accuracy of information conveyed. Likert (1961: chapter 4) has called for such inventorying of communication events and acts in organizational evaluation.

In the osteopathic-medicine study, many people were unaware of the osteopathic school of thought, its contemporary focus and varied treatment approaches (surgery, prescription drugs and x-ray treatment as well as massaging or manipulation of joints and other body parts) and other important factors.

The survey suggested that this lack of awareness stemmed largely from the small number of D.O.'s. In the nation as a whole, M.D.'s outnumbered their osteopathic brethren by about 20-1. In Ohio, the ratio was around 10-1. Assuming more or less random choice of family physicians, then, a large majority of people would have had little or no direct contact with D.O.'s.

In another area, data suggested that those who'd been in osteopathic hospitals -- as well as those with D.O.'s as their family physicians -- tended to have high awareness and approval of osteopathy. The relationship with regard to family physicians

held up even with several variables controlled. However, when statistical controls for perception of the hospital itself were introduced, the correlation between hospital use and perceived osteopathic credibility nearly disappeared.

Why the difference between these two experiences? It appears that this is largely a matter of the social contact involved. Specifically:

1. D.O.'s pride themselves in developing a caring relationship with patients. This involves taking time to explain diagnoses and treatment, making follow-up calls to see how a patient is doing, and so on. Such continuing, rather intimate interaction presumably permits the physician to educate patients on a broad range of osteopathic beliefs and practices.

2. The experience of going to an osteopathic hospital provides few such opportunities for informative interaction. In a hospital, patients tend to have far more contact with nurses, who are not authorized to talk about medical treatment and diagnosis in detail, than with physicians. Further, hospital patients are often too ill to have much thoughtful discussion (Culbertson and Stempel, 1985).

In the law-enforcement study, several observers reported that the cop walking his beat on foot had almost become a thing of the past. Police patrolled almost entirely in cars. That switch, carried out largely for efficiency, had reduced personal contact with ordinary citizens.

Furthermore, as police training has expanded and become more formal, cops have behaved increasingly in line with bureaucratic rules and abstract calculations -- "by the book," rather than based on flexible, person-to-person negotiation and understanding. That, in turn, probably has contributed to the view that police are not attentive to unique local needs (Fink and Sealy, 1974:33-46).

Frames of Reference or Standards of Comparison Helson (1964) has built a theory on the proposition that people inevitably interpret quantities with reference to some standard. Understanding public opinion surely requires analysis of these standards -- referred to by Helson as adaptation levels.

In a broader sense, judgments and beliefs, sometimes called "schemata" by psychologists, influence the way people make assessments (Graber, 1984). Sometimes these schemata result from widespread socialization within a society or smaller group, qualifying them as cultural and subcultural beliefs. At other times, however, these beliefs develop in the course of unique, personal learning experiences which the learner does not share with a broad range of others.

One schema which showed up in the osteopathic study was a belief that manipulative therapy was appropriate only for a fairly narrow range of elements. Only those who felt that D.O.'s held this view appeared to see manipulative therapy as a clearly positive factor within osteopathy (Culbertson and Stempel, 1985).

In the police study, assessment of educational and service activities hinged largely on the degree to which those efforts appeared to relate to crime prevention -- especially in such salient, widely publicized areas as sexual abuse, kidnapping of children and drugs. Thus a persuasive or political strategy seemed apt to succeed only if it tied diverse police activities to crime prevention in the public mind (Culbertson and Shin, 1989).

The data also tentatively suggested a sequence of persuasive strategies. People who favored such "Overt PR" activities as running a booth at a local craft festival usually supported community-service efforts such as unlocking car doors. These service supporters, in turn, tended to favor general crime prevention efforts. And "crime preventers" emphasized work relating to specific, widely publicized crimes. The apparent message: build support for your traditional mission and <u>then</u> try to sell people on the importance of an expanded, service-oriented role.

Political Context

<u>Activities and Strategies of Political Actors</u> In the medical study, the literature review revealed a fascinating history of intrigue and political machinations involving the osteopathic school of medicine.

The new school's founder was a rebel M.D., Dr. Andrew Taylor Still, who had become disenchanted with the crude treatment techniques of the day -- using leaches to suck blood, and so on.

Still taught his disciples that the physician can seldom really "cause" a cure. Rather, he or she should focus on removing obstacles to the body's natural curative powers (Gevitz, 1980).

As the osteopathic school began to compete with the powerful M.D. or allopathic school, considerable pressure was placed on D.O.'s to merge with M.D.'s. In the early 1960s, such a merger occurred in California. However, D.O.'s there soon found they were not accepted fully as M.D.'s -- especially when they moved to other states. A court ruling soon dissolved the merger. Yet these events served to heighten fears that, if a nationwide merger occurred, osteopathy would disappear as a distinctive school of health care. D.O.'s would get lost in the shuffle within the huge American Medical Association (Gevitz, 1980:180-4).

Small wonder, then that D.O's reacted strongly against anything hinting at a possible merger. The questionnaire in the Ohio study asked whether they'd emphasize differences more than similarities, or the converse, in osteopathic public relations. By a 2 1/2-1 margin, they voted for differences.

Unfortunately, the general-population respondents saw things differently. In their eyes, perceived M.D.-D.O. similarity was a plus. In fact, it was the second most powerful predictor of D. O. credibility (Culbertson and Stempel, 1982:45). Apparently people wanted total health care rather than specialized treatment of a narrow range of ailments in only a few specific ways. They

attributed such total care to M. D.'s. And they held osteopathy in high regard largely when they felt it approached this ideal.

Use of osteopathic hospitals and the media to tell this story of total care seemed called for. However, another political problem stood in the way. Most osteopathic facilities rely on M. D.'s in certain specialty areas, and these people often object to over-promotion of osteopathy. The researchers pointed out that hospitals could use brochures, displays and other techniques to enhance understanding of osteopathic philosophy, which many M. D.'s had come to accept, without stressing the osteopathic school of medicine per se.

In the livestock-magazine study, political "strategies" became an issue in a rather surprising way. Members of the organization or association sponsoring the magazine often said they wanted new and controversial issues to be aired fully in the magazines (Jeffers, 1988). This implied a publication might play a useful role in "consensus building." However, this creates possible problems for the association staff. Who decides how many "sides" there are to an issue, who should speak for each side, and so on?

Further, a trade or professional organization's power in lobbying and other PR areas may hinge in part on a perception that members agree. If they do not, legislators and others may dismiss organizational stands as reflecting no clear consensus and thus not being worthy of serious consideration.

Association officials clearly have a "PR" problem here. They're apt to be reluctant to have controversial matters fully aired in the magazine. However, containing dissent "within the ranks" may not work where inter-personal channels -- and independent media -- are active. Furthermore, anything that smacks of a "coverup" often creates additional PR problems once it is discovered.

Role and Power Relationships The above discussion makes it clear that the question of who has power and who doesn't helps shape PR problems and possible solutions.

In the medical study, the D.O.'s reluctance to work with -- and emphasize similarities to -- medical doctors stems in large part from power differences. Power resides partly in numbers, and it's been noted that M.D.'s still outnumber D.O.' greatly.

In police work, law-enforcement officers tend to come from lower socioeconomic strata. Yet they are seen by citizens with whom they deal most often -- presumably also from the lower strata -- as representing powerful elites. In a real sense, then, they are caught in the middle with little or no support base (Whittington, 1971).

Also in the realm of status, two groups often seen as relatively powerless and somewhat vulnerable to crimes turned out to be the police department's strongest fans. These groups, women and retired folks, tended to support almost all police activities, including those with little obvious tie to crime solution or prevention (Culbertson and Shin, 1989).

Unfortunately, these groups do not earn or control a great deal of wealth or pay large amounts of taxes needed for police. Perhaps lobbying for additional support may require emphasis on other, more upscale, publics.

In the livestock-magazine study, status and power differentials appeared to create potential problems in at least two areas.

First, as in other occupations, women appeared to be relegated quite often to the low-status role of "production technician," not "communication manager." Also, while nearly 80 percent of men sampled believed there are equal promotions, only about half that number of female staffers felt the same way (Jeffers, 1987).

Second, it was noted earlier that younger members of the livestock association studied felt a need for "service" information helpful in day-to-day management of their farms. Older members, on the other hand, preferred human-interest content as well as material on "distant" economic and political issues remote from individual farmers.

Such divergence poses a dilemma for editors. Younger members may have the most urgent needs. Yet older cattlemen may be in a better position to put pressure on a publication staff because of their longer tenure -- and probable higher status -- within the sponsoring society.

In sum, these political processes obviously relate to social context. However, social processes become political to the

extent that they involve efforts to gain power and resources at a group or societal level.

Economic Context

Availability of Resources to Client Organizations and Publics Police-community relations (PCR) has long suffered partly because it commands few resources or qualified personnel. PCR workers within police departments often have had little job-relevant training. Further, they have tended to view such assignments as demotions. As a result, police-public relations have tended to emphasize hype and surface appearances rather than two-way communications (Trajanowicz, 1973:119-38).

This analysis, of course, is a classic case of the practitioner's plea that he or she cannot do the job well without being part of the management team. That, in turn, requires a political process of gaining clout for the PCR person.

As noted earlier, readers of livestock magazines seemed to have their content preferences shaped partly by economic factors. Large breeders wanted human-interest and issue-oriented material partly because their contacts, resources and status gave them access to other sources of information on day-to-day management.

Resources tend to go hand in hand with status. The perception of unfair treatment of female livestock-magazine staffers apparently involved some concern with status and power differentials -- and some with pay.

Costs: Coping With and Cutting Them In the medical study, Ohioans were asked to name the most troublesome problem facing

health care in America. They mentioned cost 10 times as often as any other single item. Obviously fear of high fees was widespread (Culbertson and Stempel, 1982:60).

However, a study of Ohio's 11 largest newspapers show very little coverage of cost (Culbertson and Stempel, 1983). Why? Perhaps costs simply aren't easy to cover given space and time constraints of journalism. Reasons for high costs are often too complex to cover in a short news story. Further, cost stories tend to be technical and bureaucratic -- not easily adapted to the media thirst for "human interest" angles and clear implications for results.

All of this presents an opportunity for osteopathy. That school of medicine places great emphasis on exercise, manipulative therapy, preventive medicine and other low-cost measures. Further, such topics seem amenable to feature treatment which, according to the content study mentioned earlier (Culbertson and Stempel, 1983), Ohio newspapers welcome.

Cost containment, then, could play a major role in osteopathic PR efforts. And those D. O.'s who reported they had taken the initiative in presenting story ideas to the press said they'd gotten better, fairer coverage than did physicians who just "sat there and waited to be covered." Thus physician columns and initiatives to reporters and editors seemed worth developing.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, the ability to analyze a client's social, political and economic contexts insightfully is crucial. In fact, it can be argued this type of activity distinguishes the true PR professional from the "publicist" or "hack." Employing this approach is not only more intellectually satisfying for the practitioner, it is also more helpful for the client or organization. Seldom is the structure of a PR problem so simple that isolating and analyzing one or two factors is of much consequence.

Further, also as noted previously, sophisticated public relations has a research component and an appreciation for the S-P-E Contexts has payoffs here as well. For instance, many often become frustrated with, and disdainful of, public relations research because it appears to be "esoteric" and "a purely academic exercise." Often, this is because, out of necessity, the researcher has to focus on such a limited number of variables.

However, if, in spite of methodological or other restrictions the researcher places any study in the perspective of the interrelated social, political and economic contexts affecting the client or organization, the client has an easier time of grasping the implications of the results.

Consequently, the practitioner can truly serve the client or organization by developing a comprehensive public relations campaign--one that considers the impact on the organization's contextual variables as well its image.

What are some things the public relations educator can do to foster an appreciation of the S-P-E Contexts in addition to incorporating classroom exercises like those mentioned earlier in this paper?

First, educators can actively demonstrate an intellectual curiosity for their students by expressing, in word and deed, a love for informal and formal learning. Doing so will show students that having a tendency to question and an ability to see connections among seemingly disparate arguments and pieces of evidence are valuable skills.

Second, when advising students on what courses to take outside of public relations, educators can encourage students to acquire a broad social-science background. This would involve taking courses in sociology, political science and economics as core disciplines for the three contexts as well as courses in psychology, management, philosophy, marketing and mass communication.

Further, encouraging students to develop their skills in survey research, content analysis, library and computerized information retrieval searching and other research techniques would be beneficial.

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